Your Money or Your Life
Chautauqua
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When I was a child, a very long time ago, B.T. - before television, Sunday evening was when my mother, father, little brother and I listened to the radio. After dinner we gathered in the living room around the huge Philco floor model radio with its elegant wood and tapestry front and its mysterious yellowish green glowing dial, and listened to thirty-minute radio programs, one after another. Fibber Mcgee and Molly - that may have been Saturday night - Phil Harris, and everybody's favorite, the Jack Benny Show. Benny. Was a very popular comedian: there was music - Dennis Day, an Irish tenor sang several numbers and there were comedy sketches with other characters - Mary, Benny's wife, Rochester, his valet and driver. Benny was known for his penuriousness, he was wealthy but a notorious cheapskate, a real penny- pincher. A regular part of the program was when Benny and Rochester visited his basement money vault: down creaky stairs, a series of locks being unlocked, a heavy vault door opening and squeaky cash drawers opening. It was all, over done and, I thought, absolutely hilarious.

In one sketch that later became a television commercial, Benny is mugged. A thug sticks a gun in his ribs and says, threateningly, "Your money or your life." There was a long silence. Benny doesn't say a thing and the longer it went the funnier it was. The robber, now impatient, says: "I said - your money or your life!" Finally, Benny responds - "I'm thinking. I'm thinking."

Well, I thought that was about the funniest thing I had ever heard. Years later, after a vocation which, to my surprise, had a great deal to do with money, I wonder if there was not more than comedy going on here. I learned that when we are thinking and talking about money we are, at the same time, thinking about

something profound: values and ethics and responsibility and personal management and stewardship in its broadest sense. In fact, when we are thinking and talking about money we are coming very close to the meaning and purpose of life itself.

The theme this week at Chautauqua is: Money and Power through a Spiritual and Ethical Lens. The theme is further described like this:

"Religious communities and individuals of conscience take seriously their stewardship over money and relationships to the material world and power, and are especially cautious about the corrosive and corrupting effects of wealth on virtue, and about the tendency to greed and absence of caring for the good of all. This week we will take a closer look at money and power from ethical and spiritual, perspectives."

That's quite an agenda. My ethical and spiritual perspective is Christian, and the lens through which I see and think about money and power is what is sometimes called the Judeo-Christian Tradition, Hebrew and Christian scripture and particularly, Jesus of Nazareth, who had a lot to say on the subject, much more, by the way, than he had to say about sex, to the profound disappointment of some of my brothers and sisters in the faith. That is, of course, a whole other subject.

On this subject Jesus said some very interesting and incisive things: radical.

For instance: "How hard it will be for a those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God." The efforts to wiggle out of that one have been many and creative down through the centuries. Some have concluded that there must have been a small entrance in the city wall through which a camel could be squeezed if it was unloaded and down on its knees and had two men pushing from behind. Difficult but theoretically possible. Others note that the Aramaic word for camel is similar to the word for rope. So again, difficult

but possible. The scholars assure us that none of those are legitimate. That Jesus apparently meant what he said. And that he did add a saving post script that changes the whole point…"for God all things are possible."

He also said: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.…For what will a profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit life?"

The Greek word translated "life" here is "psyche". It is really more than "life". Sometimes "psyche" is translated "soul" and sometimes “self.” It's your essential, rock-bottom self: your identity as "you" that's at stake here.

What good is it to gain the whole world and lose that?

There is a wonderful John Updike short story entitled The Wallet. It's about Fulham, a retired banker who had "assembled a nice life - blue-eyed wife still trim and presentable after thirty years of marriage, red-haired daughter off in the world and doing well, handsome White House in the older suburbs."

Fulham spends his time managing his own investments and those of a few favored old clients in an upstairs room. Every morning he gives to his room with the Wall Street Journal, a second cup of decaffeinated coffee, to make phone calls, look out the window at his neatly manicured lawn, to survey the world he had gained." (Notice Updike's use of Biblical language with the peculiar word "gain". He does that a lot.)

But then disaster strikes Fulham. One morning he can't find his wallet. Now if you are not an obsessive person you are not only very fortunate but you may not fully understand the impact of what is going on here. If you are, and if you spend as much time as I do in a state if agitation because you can't find your keys or your iPhone or your favorite pen and if somewhere in the back of your mind you suspect someone is taking your things and hiding them, you may find this story painfully amusing and, I

hope, provocative.

Fulham looks everywhere: under chairs, beds, he even goes through pockets of suits he hasn't worn for months. He goes a little beserk. His wallet was a "friendly adjunct to his person, a reminder, in its delicate pressure against his left buttock, of his new stage in life....containing charge cards from Bay Bank, Brooks Brothers, Hertz, VISA, American Express and Master Card, the Harvard Co-op, Massachusetts General Hospital - plus his plasticized divers license and cards signifying his membership in the Museum of Fine Arts, Country Club, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Social Security and various sentimental momentous and pictures."

After several days of searching, Fulham announces to his wife that someone obviously has slipped into their home and stolen his wallet, punctuating his announcement with a obscenity.

His wife says, " I've never seen you like this."

"How am I?"

"You're wild."

"It was my wallet. Everything is in it. Without that wallet I'm nothing."

Fulham finds his wallet, of course. In fact, his grandson finds it folded up in a blanket on the couch, Updike concludes with him "squeezing the beloved bent leather book between his palms and feeling very grandparental, fragile, wise, and ready to die."

What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit life.?

It's your soul, your essential self. It's your deepest, most authentic, most profound self, your identity. That's what's on the

line here.

H. Richard Niebuhr, brother of Reinhold Niebuhr, and a very distinguished theologian himself, wrote: " Everyone has a center of value on the basis of which our everyday, operating values are founded and have their meaning. That center of value is essentially theological whether or not we are traditionally religious. It is our God, the object or our loyalty and worship."

Another fine thinker, Robert Wood Lynn, who was the head of the Department of Religion at the Lilly Endowment and thought a lot about religion and wealth wrote: "Money has a particular power on American life. Lacking a landed gentry or titled aristocracy the primary indicator of status in American life is the amount of money a person controls. Consequently money has a symbolic place in the common life that enables it to fulfill a number of non-economic functions." Bob Lynn wrote that before Mr. Trump's unabashed and unrestrained bragging about his wealth with the accompanying claim that his "billions and billions" are evidence of his intelligence, competence, judgment and character.

"Money" Lynn wrote "is the way middle class Americans keep score in various competitions - such as career, that inform daily life. For many Americans money represents the self and its values." (Unexplored Territory in Congregational Studies: Cultures of Giving, with Glenn T. Miller - Lilly paper)

For a variety of reasons - good fortune, an abundance of natural resources, a market friendly economy and political system, and a phenomenally creative and successful advertising and marketing industry, we have become not only the wealthiest people in the history of the world but also the most conspicuous consumers and accumulators the world has ever known. We have mountains of what the late George Carlin labeled "Stuff". Americans love our "stuff". We have so much stuff that a unique industry - a major industry has emerged among us - to build, maintain and rent storage facilities for the stuff we no longer have room for in our homes. One wonders what archeologists and anthropologists,

a thousand years from now, will think when they discover, dotting the landscape, these rows of big, square boxes, with locked doors, full of stuff. I read an essay on it once, I believe in the NYT: stories about people and their accumulated stuff. The article said that people actually come to their storage facility to visit their stuff. There was even a picture of a man sitting in a plastic chair, can of beer in hand, in front of the open door of his storage facility, visiting his stuff on a Saturday afternoon.

Now I confess that this topic makes me very nervous - because I love my stuff. It's probably because I was born at the end of the Great Depression and there wasn't much stuff in our home. In any event, for some reason I find it very difficult to let anything go, discard, walk away from - anything. Moving recently from a condominium to a Retirement Community necessitated "down sizing", a term I hate. I simply had to reduce the number of books on my shelves and it was excruciating. I spent hours looking at each one, leafing through to see what I had underlined and written in the margins. It was painful but I finally did if - gave away maybe 25-30% of my books. I still have too many. My T-shirts and baseball caps are another matter and I won't even go there.

My salvation is a wife who, in this regard, is my exact opposite, or compliment. This is a woman who regularly, does the unthinkable. When we travel and have a long flight ahead she buys a paper back book and as she reads it tears out the pages and discards them. When she is at the top of her game, when the trip is over the book is gone. The rule of thumb for my books is "Two years and out". "Have you looked at that book in the last two years?" she asks sweetly. I lie. "Why of course. Just last week I was reading through Volume Three of Paul Tillich's Systematic Theology."

Things got a little touchy when we were moving form a large house in Columbus, Ohio, to downtown Chicago. For months before the move the children and I would meet in the alley behind our home, after school and work, to go through all the trash she had discarded that day, recover treasures and

carry them back into the house.

We are the wealthiest people in the world and in all of human history, not all of us, but most of us. We consume and accumulate at a level that is not sustainable and incredibly wasteful. We have, all of us, much more than we need. We have too much stuff. The life style our wealth enables is using up natural resources at an unsustainable rate and harming the environment, perhaps irreversibly in the process. Now, the effectiveness of a self- righteous rant at this point and on this topic is highly questionable. One of my mentors, the late Robert MacAfee Brown, used to say that feeling guilty about our wealth and power is a waste of time. You can't resign from the middle class, unless you want to imitate Francis of Assisi - and everyone can't do that, he said. People of faith either need to get poor or come to terms with their wealth and privilege and begin to act responsibly.

So - what are we to do? The Judeo-Christian Tradition, the Judeo-Christian lens brings to this critical conversation, I propose, three big ideas.

The first of those ides is that creation is good. The world is essentially and profoundly a good place. That is the basic, foundational affirmation of Judaism and it is on the very first page of Hebrew and Christian scripture. "In the beginning when God created the world" - the first sentence in the first book of the Bible. God hovering over and breathing into the dark, formless void, creates light. "Let there be light" and then on six successive days, God creates land, the heavens, seas, rivers, vegetation, moon and sun, swarms of creatures, birds and fish, cattle and creeping things, and finally, human beings - created in the image of God with responsibility for the whole project. And, very significantly, at the end of each day, God steps back and observes what has been created and declares, "It is good." At the end of the sixth day, "It is very good."

The importance of that affirmation is that religion doesn't often come to that conclusion about creation. Religion often

doesn't seem to believe that creation is good. In fact, sometimes it seems that religion believes the opposite - that creation, the world, physical matter, nature, bodies - all of it is not good at all: that goodness, righteousness, real meaning reside somewhere else, in another, other-worldly realm, the realm of the spirit. The Christian Era was born at a time that thought like that, heavily influenced by Greek thinking, Greek philosophy, a Greek world view. Christianity was born from the womb of Judaism, Hebrew thinking and a Hebrew world view with its respect for and confidence in the goodness of creation and everything that is in it. The Greeks, however, saw things very differently. It's a long and complex story but the short form is this. Greek thinking, and much of earlier religious mythology, divided reality into two separate realms: one good and one not so good: the physical realm - the realm of creation, of tangible, physical matter which one can see is temporary. The other realm is the realm of the Spirit, not physical, ethereal, not temporary. The Greeks concluded that permanence, goodness, righteousness, truth, reside in the spiritual realm and that the purpose of religion, and philosophy, is to deliver a person to this higher, spiritual realm.

In the complex thinking of St. Paul, Christianity's first theologian, both ideas are present and seem sometimes to be in conflict or at least competition: the Hebrew goodness of creation and the Greek suspicion of the physical order, "the flesh." The physical world is full of temptation, with all those human bodies with all their needs, and desires and appetites. To be spiritual you have to leave all that behind, control, discipline and ultimately deny. Salvation, in a Christianity in thrall to the Greeks seems to be a deliverance from the creation to repose serenely in the realm of the spirit.

When you put a Greek lens in front of the Hebrew story of creation you come out with a different conclusion. The story of Adam and Eve, for instance, becomes the story of sensual, bodily temptation and what happens ultimately must have something to do with sex - what with that young couple walking around naked in the garden with nothing else to do. Sex, of course, is not mentioned in the text. What is there: what is central to the text is

responsibility, or irresponsibility.

Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, describes the watering down by Greek thinking of the Hebrew goodness of creation succinctly. "The material world - the human body - was regarded as inferior, the seat of evil, dangerous, and fundamentally unreal. To get in touch with the Real, one had to slough off so far as possible one's natural attachments together with the passing associated with them. Through such detachment one might rise to the realm of the spirit. Hence, the function of religion - and philosophy - was to lift persons out of "bondage to the flesh" and relate them to the transcendent - the realm of the spirit. Salvation in Hellenism means salvation from the world." (Dominion as Stewardship, in Imagining God, p 32)

Remnants of Hellenism are still very much with us - in some Evangelical Christianity's discomfort with the world, particularly human sexuality and it's almost obsession with sexual behavior - and in our Roman Catholic brothers' and sister's ongoing struggle with the tradition that sex is for procreation not fun, and that clergy must remain celibate.

Big idea number one: Creation is good. Human life in the creation is basically good, always potentially righteous. Human possessions, including money, in and of themselves, are not evil, but always include the potential for goodness, righteousness, justice.

And that brings us to the second big Judeo-Christian idea related to money and power - and that is responsibility.

If you remove the Greek filter and read the Hebrew account of creation, the problem is not worldly, sensual temptation and sex at all. It's the refusal to be responsible. The man and woman are given the freedom to enjoy the goodness and abundance of the garden, with one exception. They are not to eat the fruit of one tree. You know what happens next: a snake tells Eve that she doesn't have to play by the ground rules, that the fruit of this tree is particularly delicious and she should feel free to help

herself - which she promptly does. She eats the forbidden fruit and it is so good she persuades Adam to have a bite- which he does. When the creator discovers what has happened and holds them to account they sound like any child caught with a hand in the cookie jar. Adam says, "She made me do it" and Eve blames the snake. If you are hold enough perhaps you remember the hilarious Flip Wilson comedy routine, dressed outrageously as Geraldine, claiming, after some untoward behavior - "The devil made me do it!"

So at the very heart of the tradition is this notion that we are given responsibility for creation, power if you will. Consequently, at the heart of the tradition is an analysis of what has gone wrong and it's not giving in to physical temptation. It is the abject refusal to be responsible. Our original sin, therefore, is irresponsibility.

God has made us partners in creation and our consistent refusal to be responsible for the creation has led, among other things, to the degradation of the entire ecosystem, the despoiling of the garden. We have made a first class mess of things by refusing to be responsible - eating all the fruit, using up all the resources, still incredibly arguing about the veracity of climate change, global warming in face of mammoth, irrefutable scientific evidence - still pathetically claiming that we are not responsible, still drilling, fracking, burning, still demeaning efforts to find alternatives to polluting the atmosphere, still dumping our raw sewage in the ocean. Consistent with our earliest diagnosis of the human condition we still refuse to be responsible about our role in the garden and the hell with the results.

Our money and power, as individuals, as a community, as a nation, as the human race, are not evil, not even morally ambiguous, but always carry with them the potential for goodness, righteousness, Justice, partnership with the creator.

We are the responsible agents in the equation - responsible for the entire creation, responsible for one small corner of the

garden, our communities, our families, our own lives: responsible for the full employment of whatever money we have and power we exercise. The original sin, it seems to me, is to shrug our shoulders and say "I can't do anything about it."

Which brings us to the third big Judeo-Christian idea: the mandate to give: to give life away: to give ourselves to something larger and grander than our own amusement and survival. Jesus, the Jewish rabbi, put it simply, eloquently and starkly: " If you wish to save your life, you will lose it. If you want to save your life - if you want to live your live fully, vitally, happily - you will have to find some way to give your life away."

That is perhaps not only the most thing he said, it also has wide currency. Erik Erikson taught that human life is circumscribed by a series of issues each of us must resolve. The issue - the "crisis" - he called it, of middle age is "Generativity or Stagnation." Generativity, Erikson said, is the readiness to care for the next generation - the willingness to live for a purpose larger than my own life. The alternative, the danger, he said, is stagnation. If you don't make the commitment to care for life beyond your own - you stagnate. And, Erikson said, you will begin to indulge yourself obsessively, as if you were your own only child.

Viktor Frankel came to the very same conclusion out of his experience as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. To focus only on one's own predicament, one's own suffering - regardless of how horrific - was to continue to decline in strength and will to live. Caring for another, someone else, has within it the power to live and survive.

In David Brooks' fine book, The Road to Character, the same theme emerges time and time again. Commitment to a cause beyond our own survival, our own amusement and entertainment, enables life to be lived thoroughly, fully, and in the deepest sense, satisfactorily and happily. George Marshall, Chief of Staff of the United States Army in the Second World War and, later, Secretary of State for whom the Marshall Plan, that

rebuilt Europe after the war, was named, was a very modest man. Marshall put it in terms of commitment to an institution that was here before your were born and will be here after you are gone: for him the United States Army, but it could be the law, the church, science, art - something that calls you out of yourself.

Before he died tragically and much too soon, David Foster Wallace delivered a remarkable Commencement address at Denison University. He told the graduates that there is no such thing as atheism, "no such thing as not worshipping. The only choice we get is what to worship...If you worship money and things there will never be enough. If you choose to worship beauty and sexual allure you will die a million deaths when time and aging start showing. Worship power and you will feel weak and afraid. Worship your intellect and you will end up feeling stupid, always on the edge of being found out."

"You can slip into this kind of worship little by little, day by day", he said. "Or you can choose something to worship, to give your life to, to sacrifice for, to live and die for. It's up to you. You get to decide." (Martin E. Marty, CONTEXT, February, 2009)

We are the wealthiest, most powerful people in the wealthiest most powerful nation in the world and in all of human history. With that wealth and power come enormous responsibility. How that responsibility is exercised is both personal and social. It becomes a political issue for each of us, one that is before us now in stark and dramatic terms.

You and I, even though at time we do feel like it, have more money and more power than our parents and grandparents could begin to imagine. It's a good thing and with it come both privilege and responsibility.

Jack Benny's accoster was exactly right.

It is a matter of - Your Money or Your Life.